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ABSTRACT

Internship coordinators in mass media departments face problems both from within the unit where they are employed and externally from conditions at the internship site. Of the two, the most threatening from a career advancement standpoint are the internal problems. Students often plan poorly when considering internships. Some students demand an internship, only to reject one when it is actually available. Others show little initial interest, then make unreasonable demands on the internship coordinator at the last minute. When the internship fails, the coordinator is usually blamed. More threatening than student dissatisfactions is the reward structure of most academic units. Most coordinators find their service does them little good when considered for tenure or promotion. An internship coordinator hired from the media professions (as opposed to the academic ranks) is in no less peril, as he or she may lack the knowledge and sophistication to function effectively in an academic environment. An aggressive, pragmatic internship coordinator may be perceived by faculty as being shallow and arrogant. Further, the internal evaluation process for the internship coordinator is often murky and fails to consider conditions over which the coordinator has no control such as the school's location, the economy, etc. The most obvious way to avoid these perils is to reject appointment as an internship coordinator entirely. Failing this, the scholar should accept the position only for a limited time. (Author/TB)

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The Internship Coordinator: Problems and Perils

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ABSTRACT

Internship Coordinators face problems both from within the unit where they are employed and externally from conditions at the internship site. Of the two, the most threatening from a career advancement perspective are the internal problems.

Students often plan poorly when considering internships. Some students demand an internship, only to reject one when it is actually available. Others show little initial interest, then make unreasonable demands of the Internship Coordinator at the last minute. Students also often harbor unrealistic expectations regarding the internship experience. When the experience fails to meet the expectations of the intern, regardless of the reasons, the Internship Coordinator is usually blamed. Although student dissatisfactions are usually rooted in the attitudes and expectations of the student, administrators may not hold the Internship Coordinator blameless.

More threatening than student dissatisfactions is the reward structure of most academic units. Most Internship Coordinators on an academic line find that their service as Internship Coordinator does them little good when they are considered for tenure or promotion. Although this is generally understood by sophisticated academicians, a naive scholar beginning a career may be misled by an administrator regarding the value of service

in advancing the scholar's career. Few senior faculty members are likely to accept appointment as Internship Coordinator and may perform poorly if forced into the position.

An Internship Coordinator hired from the media professions and placed on a staff rather than an academic line is no less in peril. Having viewed the internship process from only an employer's perspective, the individual may lack the knowledge and sophistication necessary to function effectively in an academic environment. An aggressive, pragmatic Internship Coordinator may be perceived by faculty as being shallow and arrogant. Differences involving philosophy, procedures, and salary may create serious divisions between the Coordinator selected from the industry and the academicians. Such an Internship Coordinator may find him or herself in a no-win situation unless the unit administrator takes steps to bridge the gap.

The internal evaluation process for the Internship Coordinator is often murky and fails to consider conditions over which the Coordinator has no control. A simplistic numerical tally of internships supervised is an inadequate measure because internships vary dramatically in terms of quality. Likewise, the number of internships available is a function of the school's location, the strength of its curriculum, and the institutional requirements regarding internships. Factors such as the state of the economy or a particular industry sector and fluctuations in the abilities of graduates year to year also make numerical

evaluations difficult. None the less, some administrators rigidly apply such numerical criteria.

The most obvious way to avoid these perils to the individual's career is to reject appointment as Internship Coordinator entirely. This is especially true if the individual wishes to gain tenure and advance in the academic ranks. Failing this, the scholar should accept the appointment for only a limited time. A person entering the position from the media industries would be wise to approach the job cautiously. Time is needed to establish the personal and professional rapport with the faculty required for success over the long term. The Coordinator coming from the industry should also establish clear, written understandings with the unit administrator regarding evaluation criteria. In addition to these formal understandings, the Coordinator should take care to document his or her daily activities related to the task. Every opportunity should be taken to bring the successes of the program's interns and its Coordinator to the attention of the unit administrator.

It is only by recognizing the perils inherent in assuming the position of Internship Coordinator and dealing with them effectively that an individual can serve in such a position without peril to his or her personal career advancement and security.

The Internship Coordinator: Problems and Perils

The job of Internship Coordinator is not an easy one. Many of the perils are external, problems resulting from conditions existing at the site of the internship. The effects of an increasingly transient labor force, frequent changes in media ownership, opposition from labor unions, concerns related to liability issues, greater competition resulting from a larger pool of applicants, and a general lack of understanding regarding labor laws by sponsors are among the job site conditions previously noted by this panel. As many media outlets ask managers to do more with less, there is a tendency for job site supervisors to be increasingly lackadaisical regarding the duties they assumed when they initiated an internship program. Sorting out the problems created by these job site conditions places an increasing burden on the Internship Coordinator. Serious as these external perils may be, they may be less threatening in the long run than internal perils because they are more often apparent and less insidious. The Internship Coordinator probably expects to deal with cranky unions, busy managers, and bureaucratic barriers at the internship site. What some persons assigned the role of Internship Coordinator fail to recognize are those perils within the academic unit, the place one would expect to receive encouragement, support and rewards. This paper will examine some of these internal perils and suggest courses of action one may take to minimize them.

Internal Perils: Internship Applicants

Many problems facing the Internship Coordinator are created by

the students seeking internships. Some students practically demand that an internship be arranged for them and show enthusiasm early in the application process, but reject an internship once it becomes available. Conversely, other students show no interest in an internship until the last minute, then expect the Internship Coordinator to pull a great internship out of the hat instantly. Internship Coordinators face cycles of feast and famine; periods during which there are more internships than applicants and other times when there are scores of applicants but only a few internships. A well-designed internship program attempts to minimize these imbalances, but natural fluctuations in enrollments and the business cycle are inevitable. Keeping internship sponsors happy when there are few qualified applicants and keeping students happy when there are few available internships is a challenge for the Coordinator.

Internal Perils: Internship Recipients

One would expect that the peril to the Internship Coordinator's career would decline once the applicants are successfully placed in internships. But complaints often escalate when an applicant is granted an internship. Interns often find the internship experience to be a disappointment. Whether the disappointment is the result of poor supervision by the sponsoring agency or unrealistic student expectations makes little difference. The Coordinator is often the focus of criticism. Sometimes a supervisor with interns coming from different institutions plays favorites. This is especially common if some interns are from the supervisor's alma mater. Reports of overt racial bias are

rare among our interns, but this is probably because we have so few minority students in our program. However, our students frequently report that supervisors in metropolitan markets... especially east coast markets...view them, at least initially, as intellectually and culturally backward. Our Internship Coordinator occasionally deals with a problem involving sexual harassment at the internship site, and there are probably incidents that go unreported. Interestingly, many of our interns complain about the abusive language used by some supervisors. Deciding how best to respond to these complaints, or whether to respond at all in a particular case, makes the Internship Coordinator's job more difficult. Although these complaints are actually functions of on site conditions, interns often blame the coordinator for disappointing experiences.

Internal Perils: Colleagues and Supervisors

Difficult as problems arising at the internship site and with students either seeking or completing internships may be, perhaps the greatest hazard facing the Internship Coordinator comes from his academic peers and administrators. And, unlike these external perils, the peril to the Coordinator coming from within the employing institution may not be recognized until it is too late.

If internship coordination is located within an academic unit, it is likely the task will be assigned to a member of the faculty rather than a member of the support staff. Institutions vary in terms of how much importance they place on each of what have been

called the three legs supporting the academic stool: teaching, research and service. In most institutions, even major research universities, teaching and service receive at least lip service by administrators. But when the chips are down, when an individual is being considered for tenure and promotion, research and, to a lesser degree, teaching are the critical concerns. Even in what may be considered predominantly teaching institutions the individual's research record may be the most important factor in the tenure decision. Service routinely gets only a cursory examination and, in some institutions, service counts for almost nothing at all.

It is not surprising that the most ambitious and politically sophisticated junior faculty members devote as little time to service assignments as possible, concentrating instead on their research agenda. While this is probably a wise decision for the individual, it usually results in a poorly administered internship program. This, in turn, can create perils for the unit's administrator if internships and permanent placements are important criteria used by those evaluating the administrator. Recognizing this threat, an administrator may be tempted to appoint an eager, but politically naive, academician as Internship Coordinator, concealing the fact that the person's chances for promotion and tenure has been compromised. There are clearly ethical problems with this practice, but more than one assistant professor has learned too late that the excellent work handling internships didn't count nearly as much as the

department chair had implied.

Seeking to avoid an ethical dilemma, an administrator can go to the opposite end of the faculty ranks and appoint a senior professor with tenure to do the job. Unfortunately, internship coordination is seldom seen as a plum appointment. Getting an entrenched senior faculty member to accept the appointment may be problematical. If a full professor is forced into the position and then fails to carry through, there is little an administrator can do, other than withhold pay increases and possibly choice teaching assignments or travel funds.

A third alternative is to appoint a non-academic staff member to coordinate the internship program. This may seem to be a better approach, but there are perils here as well. First, the administrator must find the funding to support such a position. Budgets are always tight and justifying a special allocation for internship coordination may require a great deal of initial and continuing effort. Second, finding a non-academic with the necessary skills is a challenge. Plucking someone directly from the industry may seem a logical approach, but often such persons lack the temperament needed for success in an academic environment, even in a staff role. Having seen the internship process from the outside only, professionals often arrive on campus with simplistic approaches to a complex process. Such persons may also have excessive salary demands that, if granted, can create morale problems within the academic unit. Finally,

appointment of someone other than an academic to coordinate the internship program may not please members of the faculty. While academicians of all ranks may shun appointment as Internship Coordinator, they often demand the privilege of controlling the person who is appointed. The staff member who coordinates the internship program may, therefore, be pulled in various directions unless a strong administrator provides a measure of isolation.

Internal Peril: The Performance Criteria

Another peril facing the Internship Coordinator, whether chosen from the academic ranks or the industry, is the matter of evaluation. The problem for the academically-based coordinator has been mentioned: service, whatever its quality, is seldom given equal credit with teaching and research in the reward structure. The Internship Coordinator who occupies a staff rather than an academic appointment isn't faced with an up or out tenure vote, but establishing performance criteria is still a challenge.

The problem may seem simple at first glance: the more student internships the coordinator creates and supervises, the better the coordinator's performance. But the fallacy of this measure is immediately obvious. Is a "hands on" internship with The New York Times as valuable as an "observational" internship at a small cable TV outlet? If they are not, then a simple tally of internships coordinated is not a valid measure of performance. Is it reasonable for the coordinator at a small rural college to

place as many students in prestigious urban media organizations as does the coordinator working in a large metropolitan university? Is it equitable to expect the same performance of a coordinator where the curriculum requires completion of an internship for graduation as of a coordinator where there is no such requirement? These questions suggest that a simple tally of internships created or supervised is an inadequate measure of the coordinator's performance, but such a measure may sometimes be applied.

Perhaps a better criterion of performance would be the percentage of interns hired by media industries following graduation. Practical "real-world" experience before graduation is strongly correlated with employment following graduation. And is not full time employment in a media profession a major objective of any internship program? But here again there are perils in jumping to a conclusion. External conditions within the economy or within a given industry can dramatically reduce the employment rate of graduates, with or without internship experiences. If the economy suffers a recession, the number of advertising internships may actually increase while the number of advertising students finding permanent positions with agencies following graduation declines. This doesn't mean the Internship Coordinator is doing inferior work. Internal factors beyond the coordinator's control may also affect the employment rate. An effective coordinator may place many students in internships, but if the faculty has failed to prepare the students well the number

of interns eventually employed will suffer. There is also the fact that the quality of the graduates of any program varies from year to year. Some graduating classes may have many high achievers while other classes may have only a few.

Internal Perils: Minimizing Risks

Given these external and internal perils, what should a person selected to be Internship Coordinator do to provide a measure of career protection? If the person is beginning an academic career, they would be wise to avoid the assignment entirely. If that is not possible, then they should try to negotiate with the administrator to limit the period of service to no more than two years. Failing this, the individual would be wise in most cases to seek employment elsewhere. This may seem an extreme view and there are probably instances where service as Internship Coordinator has been a vehicle for academic advancement. But the reverse is more often the case. Two additional words of warning are in order for the young person entering an academic career. First, the fledgling academician should not flatly refuse to accept the position. Obstinately refusing an assignment is not a smart way to launch any career. Second, the reluctant Internship Coordinator should not shirk the responsibilities that go with the assignment. Although an outstanding performance as Internship Coordinator may go unnoticed, a poor performance will likely haunt the individual's career for years.

Someone leaving an industry position to assume the role of Internship Coordinator would be wise to take a low profile

approach to the job initially. Unfortunately, many media practitioners entering the academy take an aggressive, even arrogant, approach and alienate the faculty before they realize their error. A certain amount of time is needed to adjust to the different culture and to build important bonds of mutual respect. Equally important, the practitioner needs an extremely good rapport with the unit's administrator. Part of that rapport must be built on a clearly defined statement regarding the role and duties of the Internship Coordinator, and an equally clear statement of the criteria to be used during evaluations. Obviously administrators need objective measures of performance when evaluating Internship Coordinators. Unfortunately, the coordinator will be in a perilous career position if the administrator applies inconsistent or inflexible criteria.

Regardless of their professional or academic base, all Internship Coordinators need the protection afforded by standardized documentation of their activities. Certainly there should be written internship agreements or contracts specifying the basic obligations and responsibilities of each party; the sponsoring agency, the student, and the academic institution. A key part of the documentation should be the procedure to be followed by the coordinator in evaluating both the value of the internship to the student and the student's performance as an intern. If the activities required by the internship or the performance of those activities by students are not carefully documented, the coordinator may have little evidence to present when his or her

performance is being challenged. Much effort can be avoided if these documents are, to the greatest degree possible, standardized for all internships handled by the academic unit. Such standardization also aids clarity when the coordinator is asked to report on his or her work.

Beyond these standard items of documentation, the Internship Coordinator can avoid peril by taking a bit of extra time and effort to collect informal, non-standardized items of documentation. For example, maintaining an informal log of office visits and phone calls related to internships can be useful documentation. A file of letters received and sent to both sponsors and students should be maintained. The Internship Coordinator should take advantage of opportunities to publicize his or her activities in ways that will come to the attention of administrators. A bulletin board with a map illustrating the locations of internships can be effective. Inclusion of an article dealing with internships in the unit's newsletter is another way of bringing the activities of the Internship Coordinator to the attention of a larger audience. And a well-written and well-illustrated internship report submitted before the annual evaluation period can serve as a helpful reminder to busy administrators.

The Internship Coordinator's role is a necessary one, but not one that is fully appreciated or frequently rewarded. There are perils to the career of anyone taking on this responsibility

whether they be faculty or staff, academician or crusty professional practitioner. The most important tip to survival in this position is to recognize its perils going in. The second most important tip is to take effective steps to minimize them.